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Against Fake Information and For Voter Literacy

Fact-checking initiatives form a major pedagogical mission

Checking the truthfulness of claims has become a more and more urgent matter. Faktabaari is one of a growing number of fact-checking initiatives that promote media and information literacy for fact-based public debate and critical thinking. These initiatives are all struggling to keep the notion of a post-truth or post-factual era from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to the founder of Faktabaari, Mikko Salo, fact-checking is a media literacy practice to increase voter literacy.

It has been variously called fake news, junk news, biased news, alternative facts, untruths, false statements, distortion, bogus stories, trolling, unverified facts, disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, propaganda, fiction, hate speech, bullshit, lies – to name but a few examples.

A number of factors have contributed to the accelerating spread of disinformation disguised as news and the resulting epithet of “post-truth era”. The exigency of deconstructing the logics of “fake news” is increasingly clear. Societies and individuals need a deeper understanding of how misinformation is purposefully produced and spread – and how this organized disinformation can be identified and brought under control.

This is, first and foremost, a great pedagogical mission, says Mikko Salo, one of the founders of the Finnish fact-checking initiative Faktabaari.

– We are encountering much more complex a problem than just the fact that there are pieces of information that are not true. It is also about how users learn to navigate in

the fast-evolving digital information environment, how technology providers and media companies provide users with information to be used as a basis for decision-making, both in the private and public life, and, finally, how democracies function, he explains.

One question is what to call the phenomenon. Many debaters would prefer to avoid the term “fake news”, as it presupposes that the material that is spread is *de facto* news. However, for lack of a better term, the term “fake news” has been adopted by many authorities. Mikko Salo was a member of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, part of the European Commission’s fake news initiative,¹ which started its work in January 2018 and delivered their final report in March.² The group grounded its work in the previous Information Disorder report³ for the Council of Europe, in which the definition of disinformation had been taken to the core concept.

Thereafter, disinformation has become the concept to use at the the EU level. It is understood as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm.”⁴

Maarit Jaakkola, Editor of Nordicom Information.

Focus on elections

Faktabaari was one of the first Nordic fact-checking initiatives. It has partnered with school teachers, librarians, journalists and journalism students to educate different target groups in need of the development of voter literacy, as they call it.

Faktabaari, from the Finnish words for *fact* and *bar*, was founded by a number of active individuals in 2014 to check claims in the Finnish election debates.

The year 2014 was an election year for the European Parliament, and the European Union turned out to be fruitful ground for developing fact-checking practices. Compared to national political systems, the European was both more complicated and less familiar to people, and there was a lot of untrue information going around. The system as such was also unable to respond to criticism, and there was constant tension between the national and transnational levels, which culminated in the Brexit.

– I felt that the Finnish journalism concerning big questions and slow processes such as energy and climate issues, as well as proceedings in science, had many shortcomings.

Initially, Mikko Salo tried to get scientists engaged in checking public debate statements about climate issues, but the scientific community was not quite ready for fact-checking. Instead, the U.S. fact-checking services FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, also operating in the area of political debates, provided functional reference models for Faktabaari.

– In elections, the most fundamental democratic values are at stake. Also, risks for democratic systems are activated. That's why many fact-checking initiatives are focusing on electoral candidates' sayings and statements that come up in the public debated related to elections, says Salo.

– We wanted to add more crowdsourcing to our processes. So far, we have tried out crowdsourcing in expertise and crowdfunding.

In the beginning, there were only five volunteers, and they founded the NGO Open Society Association offered the administrative framework to run Faktabaari's fact-checking activities. Now, the initiative is organized according to transparency principles and anyone can join. Approximately a hundred volunteers make up the Facebook group for the project.



Mikko Salo, the co-founder of the Finnish fact-checking initiative Faktabaari, collaborates to a great degree with schools. One of the developer schools has been the bilingual school Lycée Franco-Finlandais d'Helsinki.

Examples of Fact-Checking Initiatives

Nordic

- **Viralgranskaren** (<http://metro.se/viralgranskaren>): a division of the free Swedish newspaper Metro that carries out fact-checking. The subproject Lilla Viralgranskaren provides guide material for teachers and pupils.
- **Bluffakuten** (<http://www.bluffakuten.nu>): a Swedish service that reveals fake competitions and campaigns and Facebook sites that collect private information.
- **Faktisk.no**: a collaborative fact-checking venture of the Norwegian newspapers Dagbladet and VG and the public service company NRK that aims to identify fake content, financed by NRK and foundations.
- **Faktana, kiitos!** (<https://www.faktanakiitos.fi>): a Finnish project funded by the Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation that deploys journalist volunteers to teach classroom sessions around the country.
- **Jag är här** (<http://jagarhar.se>): a Swedish social media-based initiative against the spread of disinformation, driven by a nonprofit association.
- **Nyhetsvärderaren** (<http://forskarfredag.se/forskarfredags.massexperiment/nyhetsvarderaren>): a research project by Uppsala University to develop a digital tool for source criticism in schools.
- **Valkollen**: a digital platform dedicated to fact-checking carried out by newsrooms related to the Swedish elections, under construction by NTM, Bonnier, Schibstedt, SVT and SR.

International

- **First Draft News** (<http://firstdraftnews.org>): a project of the Shorenstein Center in the U.S. that uses research-based methods to fight mis- and disinformation online.
- **Full Fact** (<http://fullfact.org>): a registered charity for fact-checking in the U.K.
- **Lie Detectors** (<http://lie-detectors.org>): a project that deploys journalist volunteers to teach classroom sessions in Belgium and Germany.
- **FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com**: debunking site in the U.S.
- **The Washington Post Fact Checker** (www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker): a fact-checking service run by a legacy paper.

– To me, like to many others, this has become a way to engage without being active in party politics.

Fact-checking primetime

Faktabaari is committed to the transparency code of the International Fact-Checking Network, which has 36 verified members from 27 countries committed to ongoing fact-checking.⁵

According to Mikko Salo, media education is slow and gradual, a preventive structural activity, whereas fact-checking comprises quick responses to passing issues and has the possibility to reach atypical audiences – for example, through television.

– One of the most interesting European examples is the Spanish television programme *El Objetivo* run in the nationwide broadcast channel laSexta. It is fascinating that fact-checking can be made so popular that it is

run on television on prime time and reaches a millionwide audience!

The Nordic countries have well-organized civil societies with high trust in the authorities, and here fact-checking unfolds with less friction than in societies with less-democratic traits. However, transnational cooperation is needed. Those who are tackling disinformation on an everyday basis also need open-source tools; nowadays, many of the technical tools available are far from user-friendly.

– The crucial element for fact-checking actors' legitimacy is their independency. Many actors, from governments to global companies such as Facebook, are involved or considering to run their own fact-checking campaigns, but they always risk being somehow biased either politically or commercially. There is, therefore,

a high demand for independent actors. For independent actors, a core question is their funding.

Another challenge, according to Faktabaari's Mikko Salo, is how to keep up the quality and standards.

– We have to consider how to maintain the legitimacy of the established fact-checkers when fake fact-checkers start popping up. And how do we deal with the issue of origin of message when information is automatically produced by machines and there is no human producer?

Follow fact-checkers on Twitter with the hashtags #TackleFakeNews or #FactCheckIt, or check out the Twitter feed curated by @FactBar that features debates of European relevance.

Checklists
FaktaBaari^{EDU}

#disinformation #medialiteracy

You do not want to get cheated online, do you?



Check TITLE & pictures

- Very emotional, topical & “too easy” content?
- Especially If yes, stay alert and continue



Check the STORY

- does it have an author?
- any sources? any alternative views provided?
- if no, leave it. If yes continue



Towards your OWN judgement

- Why author seeks your attention or action?
- Check the main claim with source you trust?
- You feel not cheated? So, go ahead, **please, share good content!**



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A sample from Faktabaari's materials: how to approach material with questions relevant for fact-checking.

Fact-Checking Resources Online

- **Verification Handbook: A definitive guide to verifying digital content for emergency coverage** (<http://verificationhandbook.com>): a practical guidebook edited by Craig Silverman, available in many languages.
- **The Journalist's Toolbox Trust and Verification page** (<http://www.journaliststoolbox.org/category/trust-and-verification>): a detailed list of services and tools available for fact-checking, compiled and updated by Mike Reilly (2018).

Notes

1. See <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/fake-news>.
2. European Commission (2018a).
3. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017); see also a Nordic report, Lundgren et al. (2018).
4. European Commission (2018b).
5. See The International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter, <http://www.poynter.org/international-fact-checking-network-fact-checkers-code-principles>.

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